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SUBJECT: SPECIAL ENVOY CUMBER'S MEETING WITH THE LEADERSHIP
OF THE CLOSED ABU BAKR MOSQUE

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Classified By: Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4
(b, d)

11. (C) Summary: On 22 November, U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Sada Cumber met with Gamet Suleymanov, head imam of the Abu Bakr mosque, and the lawyer representing the mosque, Javanshir Suleymanov. The participants outlined the long and short range history of alleged religious discrimination of the mosque and its worshippers. The participants posed various theories regarding the perpetrators of the early August attack but were not inclined to give any specific details. Rather, they focused on the fact that the imam, the mosque, and the worshippers were the true victims but were receiving the most government scrutiny. For the record, the 25 November deadline for the next court decision was delayed as a result of the death of the judge of the Narimanov district court, Asif Allahverdiyev, on 24 November. End summary.

Abu Bakr mosque in context

12. (C) J. Suleymanov indicated that the actual attack on the mosque is only the most recent chapter in the five to six year campaign against the mosque. He said that since 2006, mosque defenders have filed 13-15 court cases against police officers for harassment of worshippers. He noted that followers were being arrested for having beards, their fingerprints were taken, and names put into a government database; this case was already taken to a European court. He also noted that there have been cases of worshippers being fired from their jobs merely because of their affiliation to the mosque. J. Suleymanov stressed that, regarding the closing of the mosque, neither the imam, the wounded, or the mosque itself has been treated like a victim.

Who did it?

13. (C) J. Suleymanov discussed three possibilities regarding the culprits in the attack on the mosque: 1) the official, government version of events; 2) the event could have been the work of the government special services; 3) former worshippers, who called on the imam to take a more radical stance against the government, perpetrated the attack. With regard to the government conspiracy theory, the imam himself

noted that the government has had "plants" in the mosque for a long time. Therefore, if it was the work of the government, who has had years to take action, what specific incident precipitated such an attack?

¶4. (C) The imam said that his services have been recorded, and, given that the government has planted people in the mosque, the government already has access to these recordings. Regarding the radical former worshipers, both Suleymanov and the imam said they did not know the number of radicals who were in the mosque, who they were, or where they went after they left the mosque. The imam opined that the radicals were generally foreigners who were using local Azerbaijanis to voice their message. He added, however, that there has already been a car bomb attempt on the imam's life. In summation, J. Suleymanov noted that the identification of the actual perpetrator did not matter in the context of trying to re-open the mosque.

Activities in the mosque

¶5. (C) The imam claimed that his sermons explored the true essence of Islam to overcome radical feelings. The mosque ran classes discussing the true essence of jihad and what it really means. The classes explored sentiment imported from Chechnya and Dagestan. In general, the imam claimed to be Salafist, and, in spite of claims that he is the "Chairman of Wahabis," he emphatically denied this affiliation. He added that if he were really Wahabi, he would claim the title proudly. On the topic of beards, he noted that the true radicals are shaving their beards to avoid government scrutiny; the people with beards today are not radicals.

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Consequences of the mosque closing

¶6. (C) Since the closure of Abu Bakr, the imam said, worshippers have been going to other Sunni mosques or praying at their homes. Other mosques are very small, and it is difficult for people to worship there, as they are, by police edict, not permitted to pray outside. On a related note, the State Committee for Work with Religious Structures (SCWRS) allegedly told the imam, because of his popularity, not to go to the provinces outside Baku and incite people. The imam indicated that, outside Baku, local leaders tended to dictate policy vice the central government, but that bearded Muslims were frequently targeted and their beards were often shaved or burned.

¶7. (C) The imam complained of a rising tide of religious intolerance. He stated that closing shops and firing workers who have a particular religious affiliation contributes to unemployment, which is tantamount to the acceleration of radicalization of society. He was concerned about the jailing of worshippers, as they are exposed to radical propaganda in jail which makes them more dangerous than they were when they went to jail.

Government actions

¶8. (C) J. Suleymanov insisted that the ultimate authority on the opening of the mosque was the courts, not the government; as expected, he indicated that there was no legal ground for keeping the mosque closed. Speaking about the mosque's relationship to the community, Suleymanov said that a petition of 27,000 signatures was sent to the President, First Lady, and Head of the Presidential Administration requesting that the mosque be opened. In spite of that large number, the government had found three witnesses who complained about the mosque's presence. They asserted that the many parked cars blocked the nearby roads, and, in some cases, their children were coerced to wash cars. J.

Suleymanov claimed that these same witnesses later approached the mosque and said that they were paid to testify by the local police chief, who wants the land back to make it a parking lot. In terms of the current status, Suleymanov said that the Ministry of National Security (MNS) had agreed to the opening of the mosque, but the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) had yet to agree.

Actions taken by the mosque and the legal team

¶9. (C) The legal team has sent ten appeals to various diplomatic missions, including the United States and Saudi Arabia. Surprisingly, the Saudi mission responded with a letter declining to interfere in an internal affair. The legal team has also campaigned on the radio for the opening of the mosque. In terms of expectations of the USG, both responded that, while they did not need a guardian, they desired the U.S. to stand for the rule of law. They expressed disappointment that during Ramadan Ambassador Derse made a public visit to a Shi'a but not a Sunni mosque. Additionally, they noted that while the Embassy has championed the cause of keeping Radio Liberty and BBC on the air, the USG has not given voice to what they see as a fundamental religious freedom issue. Given the embassy's access to various government ministries, the Embassy would be in a position to find out exactly where in the GOAJ the decision to open the mosque is actually being held, they speculated.

¶10. (C) Without endorsing their claims, Special Envoy Cumber expressed concern for the plight of the mosque and its worshippers and promised to discuss the matter via diplomatic channels. He noted that he had raised the mosque closure in meetings with GOAJ officials during his visit and pledged to continue seeking more information about the situation.

¶11. (C) Special Envoy Cumber did not have the opportunity to review this message.
DERSE